

## Studie

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# **Football, Nationalism, and Fan Violence in China**

Brian Bridges

### **Abstract**

The linkages between football, nationalism and spectator violence in China are analysed by discussing the reactions of the Chinese to two footballing defeats: the World Cup qualifying loss to Hong Kong in 1985 and the loss to Japan in the 2004 Asian Cup final. Using both political science and sociological perspectives, the settings of the two games and the violent post-match reactions of the Chinese fans are examined within a comparative framework against the background of Chinese nationalism, China's complex relationships with Hong Kong and Japan at the time of the two games, and the significance of sport (and football in particular) in Chinese popular and governmental perspectives. The article argues that while the concept of hooliganism might best explain the 1985 events, nationalism provides greater insight into the 2004 events. (Manuscript received January 22, 2008; accepted for publication April 23, 2008)

*Keywords: China, Chinese nationalism, football hooliganism, World Cup, Asian Cup*

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## Studie

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# **Fußball, Nationalismus und Fanausschreitungen in China**

Brian Bridges

### **Abstract**

Der Beitrag untersucht die Verbindungen zwischen Fußball, Nationalismus und Ausschreitungen von Fußballfans anhand einer Analyse der Reaktionen von Chinesen auf zwei Fußballniederlagen, nämlich der verlorenen Weltmeisterschaftsqualifikation gegen Hongkong im Jahr 1985 und der Niederlage gegen Japan im Finale der Asienmeisterschaften im Jahr 2004. Der Analyse liegen sowohl politikwissenschaftliche als auch soziologische Ansätze zugrunde. Die Schauplätze der beiden Spiele und die gewalttätigen Reaktionen chinesischer Fans nach dem Spiel werden vor dem Hintergrund von chinesischem Nationalismus, Chinas komplexen Beziehungen zu Hongkong und Japan zur Zeit der beiden Spiele sowie der Bedeutsamkeit von Sport (insbesondere des Fußballs) aus der Sicht der chinesischen Bevölkerung und der Regierung verglichen. In dem Artikel wird dargelegt, dass die Geschehnisse von 1985 am ehesten mit Vandalismus zu erklären sind, während Nationalismus größeren Einfluss auf die Vorkommnisse des Jahres 2004 hatte. (Manuskript eingereicht am 22.01.2008; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 23.04.2008)

*Keywords:* China, chinesischer Nationalismus, Fußballausschreitungen, Weltmeisterschaft, Asienmeisterschaft

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## 1 Introduction

Association football, or soccer, is undoubtedly the most truly global of all sports, attracting attention from the media, the public, politicians and business around the world. Televised sport, in particular, is dominated by football throughout the world (Horne & Manzenreiter 2004:11). As such, compared to other popular sports, football is arguably “unrivalled in its capacity to generate passionate and deeply-rooted feelings of local and national pride or shame” (Sugden & Tomlinson 2003:175). China and the Chinese are no exception to this rule.

However, amongst the mix of traditional and Western sports that the Chinese have played and continue to play, the pre-eminence of football is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Although scholars suggest that a form of football was played in China more than two thousand years ago, it was Western imperialism after the mid-nineteenth century that brought modern sports, including football, and their associated regulations to Chinese attention. The Chinese Football Association was founded in 1924, and by the 1930s football was popular across China, though it was the Hong Kong-based teams that usually carried the Chinese flag in regional and international competitions. After 1949 the football culture remained weak, with few international games beyond the links with fellow communist states. It was not until China had passed out of the disruptive effects of the Cultural Revolution and began its “open door” policy to the world in the late 1970s that mainland China (the People’s Republic of China (PRC)) – after resolving a long-standing representational tussle with Taiwan – was finally admitted to football’s world governing body, FIFA, in 1980 (Murray 1995:146-151). However, World Cup success did not follow, so the Chinese authorities were forced to reorganise the structure of the sport in China in the early 1990s as a way of creating a more professional and effective football system (Jones 1999). Since then, despite the controversies surrounding the management and transparency of the professional football leagues, football’s popularity has increased so much that it is no exaggeration to say that football is “now acknowledged as the number one sport in China” (Hwang & Jarvie 2003:84). Football is covered extensively in the Chinese media, and leading foreign football clubs and their stars are well known within China.

In post-1949 China, the development of sport became part of – and subject to – the project of building a strong nation state along socialist lines. Consistent with his ideological approach, Mao Zedong not only promoted “mass sport” at

home but also saw opportunities to utilise sport as part of his broader struggle for international recognition and legitimacy. Under the slogan of “friendship first, competition second”, the new China tried to use sport as a form of “soft power” to win friends and influence people – especially in the Third World but also, as exemplified by the “ping-pong diplomacy” with the United States, with the “capitalist” world (Close, Askew & Xu 2007:151-155). The extremes of the Cultural Revolution had disrupted sporting activities, but from the 1970s China began to reintegrate into the international – and international sporting – community. In the past three decades, economic and social change inside China has been fuelled and encouraged by China’s rising economic, political, and military power. At the same time, Chinese ambitions and expectations of success in global sporting competitions have also risen. Through sport, one nexus between national/cultural pride and international relations is formed. The efforts put into securing the hosting rights to the 2008 Olympic Games and into making that hosting successful in terms of both medal hauls and organisational efficiency are clear evidence of China’s ambitions; likewise, China’s performance on the global football scene has become one facet of this drive for sporting excellence and international recognition. It has been argued by Xu Xin that “in the history of the PRC, sport can be best understood as the continuation of politics by other means” (Xu 2006:92). This statement can certainly be applied to football in China.

In August 2004, Japan and China met in the final of the Asian Cup football competition, held in Beijing. The defending champion Japan defeated China 3-1, and after the game disappointed Chinese supporters rioted. This has been described as “Beijing’s first encounter with European-style football hooliganism” (McNeill 2004). But, in reality, it was not the first such encounter. Chinese football supporters had suffered disappointments before, and, notably, on at least one occasion previously this had resulted in significant violence and disorder: when Hong Kong defeated China 2-1 in a World Cup qualifying match in May 1985. One Chinese TV sports producer described that event as “the most serious riot in Chinese football history” (cited in Tan 2004:88).

Media survey analysis by Tan Hua has shown that the “number of violent events” at Chinese domestic football games has “increased steadily” over the past two decades or so (Tan 2004:88-90). The focus of this article, however, is on trying to better understand how and why such crowd disorder occurs in the context of international matches involving the Chinese national team. Therefore,

this article aims to carry out a comparative study by setting these two games and the post-match reactions of fans against the background of the development of Chinese nationalism, China's complex relationships with Hong Kong and Japan at the time of these two games, and the significance of sport (and football in particular) in Chinese popular and governmental perspectives.

In the following sections,<sup>1</sup> the intention is to compare these two games, and particularly their aftermaths, through two conceptual frameworks, drawing on different disciplinary backgrounds. The fans' actions will be analysed firstly as expressions of nationalism and secondly as manifestations of soccer hooliganism. It should, of course, be noted that it has not been possible to carry out surveys and interviews of Chinese fans involved in either of these two games, so the analysis of motivations has to rely on other materials, primarily the contemporary media coverage. Such a reliance does imply some limitations in the analysis since media reportage and discourse in the relevant countries does itself contribute to the cultural climate within which such antisocial behaviour by the fans occurs, not least by setting expectations in the run-up to such games. As John Kerr has argued, "without having access to the thoughts of the rioting fans, it is impossible to know their real motivation for causing trouble" (Kerr 2005:99). Consequently, any categorisation of causes has to be both cautious and tentative.

## 2 Two Games and Their Aftermaths

China and Hong Kong found themselves in the same Asian zone preliminary qualifying group for the 1986 World Cup to be held in Mexico. By the time the two sides came to their final match, played in Beijing on 19 May 1985, China had already gained enough points that a draw would be sufficient to see it go through to the next round of play-offs; Hong Kong needed a win to go through. In front of 80,000 boisterous fans, the home team was surprised when Hong Kong full back Cheung Chi-tak scored from a free kick, but Li Hui scored an equaliser later in the first half. However, in the sixtieth minute Hong Kong defender Koo Kam-fai picked up a loose ball and hit it on the volley to put Hong Kong back in

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ms Doris Pai Wah for her assistance in locating and translating Chinese-language materials relating to the 1985 China-Hong Kong match. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Convention of Asian Scholars, Kuala Lumpur, 2-5 August 2007. For their helpful comments, I wish to thank both the ICAS participants and three anonymous reviewers.

front. The home crowd was shattered and all the subsequent pressure applied by the Chinese team proved to be in vain (Gutierrez 1985).

The end of the game was greeted with a storm of boos and objects being thrown from the stands. The Chinese players refused to shake hands with their Hong Kong opponents. As Hong Kong midfielder Chan Fat-chi has recalled:

We couldn't even get off the pitch because the tunnel to the dressing room was blocked – the fans had gathered around the tunnel area and were throwing everything they had at us, including glass bottles. [...] We had to run back into the middle of the field and stay there for half an hour before the police were able to control and disperse the crowd. It was very messy. They were shouting all kinds of abuse at us. (Maitland 2004a)

On that night Lawrence Yu, one of the Hong Kong team managers, commented, “We do not deserve treatment like this. Hongkong played magnificently tonight and we won the game fairly and squarely” (Parke 1985).

Worse things were happening outside. One of the Chinese players recalled, “The fans got so angry they started burning cars. Some of them belonged to diplomats and ambassadors” (Maitland 2004a). Eight buses were stopped; their windows were smashed and commuters were forced to flee. One Japanese-made taxi was overturned, and foreigners leaving the stadium area had their cars pelted with stones, beer bottles, and sticks. Most of the damage was done in the eastern Beijing area near the Sanlitun foreigners' compound (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1985). Although an estimated 10,000 young people were involved in the riots, only 127 people were arrested; five were subsequently jailed for up to two and a half years. However, 30 policemen were injured and the Beijing vice mayor narrowly avoided being hit by a flying bottle. An emergency meeting of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government officials in Beijing held that night criticised “an extremely small group of black sheep” and described the incident as having “besmirched the image of the capital” (Gladstone 1985a). According to one of the pro-China newspapers in Hong Kong, this incident was “the worst sports violence in Beijing since the Communist Party took power in 1949” (*Ta Kung Pao* 1985). The Chinese team issued a public statement of self-criticism:

We have failed to live up to the expectations of the party and the masses of the entire country and let our people down. (Gladstone 1985b)

China's head football coach, Zeng Xuelin, was sacked, the squad was disbanded, and several players never played for China again. The traumas of that defeat and the subsequent soul-searching eventually led to the creation of the first

professional football league in China in 1994, but it wasn't until 2002 that China was successful in qualifying for the World Cup Finals.

The Hong Kong team returned home to a heroes' welcome. It has been described as "the single-most important day in sports" in Hong Kong's history (Maitland 2004a). However, Hong Kong was defeated in the next round of the 1985 play-offs by Japan and, despite entering all subsequent qualifying campaigns, has never again been so close to making it the World Cup Finals.

Post-match analysis focused on two questions: why had China lost, and why did the fans riot? In answer to the first question, Chinese complacency and Hong Kong determination seem to have been crucial. In the view of the Hong Kong coach, Kwok Ka-ming,

the weakness in China was that they never thought of losing [...]. Psychologically they went out to win. They looked down on Hong Kong. (Maitland 2004a)

Kwok's original plan had reputedly been to defend for most of the game and then only counter-attack in the last quarter of the game, but the early goal for Hong Kong changed the nature of the contest. The second question will be discussed below.

The second game was played on 7 August 2004. For the first time, the Asian Cup finals were being played in China, constituting a useful "dry run" for Chinese sports administrators for the next major sporting competition, the Olympic Games, to be held in Beijing in 2008. The Japanese team – and Japanese fans – had faced hostile crowds in all of Japan's early matches in Chongqing, where Japan successively defeated Oman, Thailand, and Jordan. Heckling and jeering were intense, and at the Japan-versus-Jordan game the local Chinese fans cheered loudly for Jordan. They stood up during the playing of its national anthem but mostly remained seated and booed during the playing of the Japanese national anthem (Takahashi 2004). The crowd was more muted during Japan's semi-final defeat of Bahrain in Jinan, but passions began to run high in the run-up to the final in Beijing. Japanese politicians publicly called on China to ensure fair treatment of Japanese players and fans, while Chinese officials blamed the Japanese media for exaggerating problems.

Throughout the final, booing and jeering of the Japanese players occurred. Japan opened the scoring with a header from Fukunishi Takashi, but China equalised through Li Ming before half-time. However, Japan's second goal came from a corner halfway through the second half as Nakata Koji appeared to handle

the ball into the Chinese net. Finally, with the game in stoppage time and China throwing everyone forward, Tamada Keiji scored a breakaway third goal for Japan. China's Dutch coach Arie Haan was so upset by the result that he refused to collect his loser's medal (Maitland 2004b).

After the game, some Chinese spectators reportedly chanted "kill! kill!" at the Japanese team and pelted its bus with bottles. The windows of the car of a Japanese diplomat leaving the match were broken, but he was not injured. A Japanese TV reporter, however, was punched after Chinese fans learned his nationality. Chinese fans burnt Japanese flags; hurled abuse at the Japanese fans (approximately 1,000 of whom had to stay in the stadium for about two hours until the police judged it possible to transport them to safety); and, having failed to breach a Chinese police cordon placed around the Japanese Embassy, camped outside the Japanese team's hotel throughout the night shouting nationalist slogans (Yan 2004; Kyodo news agency, 10 August 2004; Doi 2004). The Japanese team left Beijing as soon as possible the next day, one day earlier than originally planned.

Again, an analysis of the reasons for China's defeat will be followed later by an examination of the factors explaining the fans' reactions. As far as the defeat was concerned, much of the Chinese media supported the views of coach Haan, who blamed poor refereeing and the alleged Japanese "experience" at carrying out fouls that the referee did not see. The second Japanese goal, labelled the "hand of Koji" (echoes here of Argentinian Diego Maradona's infamous goal against England in the 1986 World Cup), was the subject of considerable criticism. Zico, Japan's Brazilian coach, on the other hand, put the victory down to the strong "spiritual power" of the Japanese players. However, regardless of the impact of the disputed goal, it seems that the Chinese team, with its most effective striker Hao Haidong going off injured early in the second half, did not have the maturity and depth to defeat the more experienced Japanese team (Maitland 2004b). Noting the need for China to develop strong youth squads and professional teams, the Asian Football Confederation's secretary general, Peter Velappan, commented afterwards, "China hasn't progressed as it should. It takes time and the fans must learn to be patient" (Yan 2004).



### 3 Nationalism and Identity

International sporting competitions, from the Olympics downwards, are inevitably tied to sports nationalism, where populations, from the state leaders down to the man or woman in the street, display their support in ways that often move beyond simple national pride and become what can be considered as chauvinistic or even xenophobic. Sport is very effective in inculcating national feelings because, as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, “the imagined community of millions seems more real as team of eleven named people” (Hobsbawm 1992:143). Of course, the ideal espoused by the founders of the modern Olympics, amongst others, that “sport has nothing to do with politics” has long been under threat, not least because “sport may be very easily integrated into the political projects of governments” (Arnaud 1998:8). Governments use sport not only as a method of projecting and enhancing a national image abroad (the Olympic Games host countries invariably do this the most blatantly), but also as a means to promote particular social, political and economic objectives at home, whether related to policies such as health, youth behaviour, economic regeneration, racial harmony, or political legitimacy (Hill 1992:2; Arnaud 1998:11).

The idea and the practice of nationalism cover a multitude of variations and definitions, but traditionally “nations” have been analysed using two influential and contrasting approaches, one seeing them as cultural communities, which emphasise the importance of ethnic ties and loyalties, and the other characterising them as political communities, which share certain political and civic allegiances. This in turn has led scholars on to a number of different ways of categorising nationalistic phenomena. However, in the context of nationalism in a sporting context, it may be more helpful to utilise the distinction between “state” nationalism and “cultural” or “popular” nationalism (Rose 2000:170). Under state nationalism, the state identifies itself with the nation and sponsors and controls the contents of nationalism, which is “propounded at the elite level by politicians and leaders usually seeking to shore up their legitimacy by appealing to people’s patriotism”. On the other hand, cultural or popular nationalism derives from society and may have different sources; it can be “driven by intellectuals, journalists and writers and focusing on debates about history, culture and national ‘values’”, but can also emerge from “ordinary” people.

The development of nationalism in modern China is a complex phenomenon. From a Chinese perspective, the struggle against aggressors since the nineteenth

century, and in particular the humiliations imposed by Japan, has been a major source for the formation of Chinese national identity and nationalism at both the state and the popular level (Friedman 1995:134-139). Up until the 1990s, nonetheless, it seemed to outside observers that state nationalism dominated in China as there were few signs of independent popular nationalism in Chinese society. Patriotism became an important part of the CCP's official ideology, being inculcated through propaganda and education, and an important component of the ruling party's legitimacy (Chan & Bridges 2006:132-133). However, beginning in the 1990s it was possible to see more evidence of an autonomous popular conception of nationalism that was expressed in various independent mass movements (Chen 2005:49-51). Regarding Japan, this nationalism was comparatively simple and straightforward, based mainly on the people's general perceptions of Japan and their own emotional needs (Chan & Bridges 2006:134). This "popular nationalism" in China has been significantly stimulated in recent years by the use of Internet and mobile phone messaging, which has allowed young Chinese in particular to keep in touch and spread ideas more rapidly.

China began a significant period of change in the late 1970s as the re-emerged leader Deng Xiaoping launched the country on what was to become an irreversible path to openness and reform. As economic reform and economic improvement began to take shape in the first half of the 1980s, there was, as Caroline Rose has argued, a convergence between the state nationalism of the CCP leadership, which depicted itself as the "paramount patriotic force" responsible for this economic success, and the cultural nationalism reflected in growing self-confidence and national pride amongst the people (Rose 2000:171-172). However, from the mid-1980s onwards, concomitant with the slow decline of ideology as a factor of influence and the appearance of certain "new unhealthy tendencies" – the corrupting side effects of economic reform – there were also signs of the declining effectiveness of state nationalism (Baum 1986:40-41). Despite regular "rectification" campaigns, one of the first of which was introduced in 1984/85, popular disillusionment with the party's role began to increase. With the previous monolithic social control of the CCP undermined, the processes of social mobilisation became more evident. In urban areas – and Beijing would not have been exempted – unrest over corruption, inflation, and social dislocation had begun to grow by 1985; as such, the citizens sought means by which to express these frustrations (Wong 2005:159-161).

Apart from his strong belief in the necessity of economic reform, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping also put great emphasis on his programme to restore China's "lost territories"; he saw both aspects as contributing to rebuilding China's status and power. Deng's main focus had been on Taiwan, for which his "one country, two systems" formula had originally been designed, but in reality the formula was to be tested out first during the negotiations and subsequent agreement with Britain over the return of Hong Kong. The Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in Beijing in December 1984. For both mainland Chinese and for Hong Kongers, the difficult process of adjusting to the planned handover, set for nearly 13 years later, began.

At that time, observers suggest, the mainland Chinese held ambivalent views about Hong Kong and Hong Kong people. While pleased that Hong Kong would be returning to the motherland, many mainland Chinese would have had problems relating to Hong Kong people, who were still living under British colonial rule. Mainland Chinese leaders and media had, over the years leading up to the Sino-British agreement, stressed the negative aspects of the "British" capitalist system in Hong Kong. Moreover, the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution had disrupted personal links with Hong Kong and the Chinese elite had become "increasingly out of touch with the more modern developments in Hong Kong" (Yahuda 1996:54). This lack of awareness of the complexities of changing Hong Kong society had two effects. Firstly, Hong Kongers were often perceived as being "foreigners" rather than pure Chinese. Some of the Chinese fans at the match were reported to have yelled slogans such as "beating Hong Kong and beating foreigners" (*Nineties* 1985a). Secondly, no doubt in part as a function of traditional centre-periphery relations in Chinese history, mainland Chinese, particularly those from Beijing, continued to look down on "provincial" Hong Kong (despite its obviously higher level of economic development). According to Tan Hua, there does exist a "Beijingesque chauvinism" that sometimes results in "a show of arrogance and a sense of superiority toward outsiders" (Tan 2004:91). This tendency was likely to be as pronounced in sporting terms as in other respects. The possibility of China losing to little Hong Kong was "unthinkable".

In the months before the qualifying games began, the Chinese government had tried to inspire the Chinese football team under slogans such as "break out of Asia, advance towards the World", which were symptomatic of a more general national aspiration to become a great power (*Nineties* 1985a). The element of state nationalism, therefore, was reflected in a strong linkage between patriotism

and success in the World Cup competition. In the early years after 1949, under Mao Zedong's anti-imperialist approach, the slogan behind Chinese international sporting activities had been "friendship first, competition second". Yet, gradually, Chinese leaders came to "appropriate Western sports as a tool to promote Chinese nationalism against Western imperialism" (Hwang & Jarvie 2003:85). The primary target in China's sports policy by the early 1980s had become the production of winning athletes in Olympic and other world sporting events; as such the promotion of sports had become "overly nationalized" (*Nineties* 1985b; Riordan & Dong 1999:166). Losing or even achieving a less-than-satisfactory result, such as a draw, in an international competition meant insulting the nation.

Several observers noted that the disappointed fans did not vent their fury on the Chinese team or the coach for their below-par performance (*Hong Kong Economic Journal* 1985). Nor did they appear to openly attack the Communist Party or the sporting establishments. However, the Chinese authorities would have been well aware of the symbolism of the month of May, associated with the revered activism of the 1919 May 4 Movement, and so party and government officials no doubt worried about the potential cross-over effect of anti-foreign demonstrations transforming into anti-regime demonstrations. Indeed, barely four months later student protests which erupted against Japanese "economic aggression" in China did contain elements of anti-"Open Door", and by implication anti-Deng, rhetoric, and the Chinese leadership went public with a warning that a youth movement can only contribute usefully when it "conforms with the trend of the times" (Baum 1986:52; Whiting 1989:74-76).

The 2004 match should be considered against the background of rapidly rising prosperity and a continued economic boom in China and the prevailing tensions in Sino-Japanese relations. Japanese companies had been participating actively in the Chinese economic growth story. Bilateral trade grew by 30 percent in 2003 over the previous year, and China became Japan's second largest export market; after some initial hesitation, Japanese companies were now investing significantly across China, with flows of investment reaching over five billion USD in 2002 alone. Yet while the two countries seemed to be growing closer economically, they had been diverging in political and strategic terms. Each side remained suspicious of the other's military build-up, and territorial claims, energy explorations in disputed waters, history textbooks, and shrine visits provoked diplomatic protests and counter-protests in the early years of the new century. In the view of Denny Roy, "strategic divergences and societal

antipathy” had become “robust” structural limitations that countervailed against the cooperative economic trends (Roy 2005:196). These mutual suspicions were amplified after Junichiro Koizumi became Japanese prime minister; his efforts to revitalise Japanese self-respect after the depressing years of the 1990s and his annual visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese war dead are remembered, incensed Chinese popular sentiment and provoked Chinese diplomatic protests (Chan & Bridges 2006). No exchanges of leaders took place to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of normalising relations in 2002 or the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sino-Japanese peace treaty in 2003, and public opinion on each side seemed to be becoming more antipathetic to the other country. One survey of Chinese Internet users, presumably predominantly young people, showed that 93 percent disliked Japan (Glosserman 2004). When a senior Chinese journalist wrote an article in late 2002 arguing against “knee-jerk criticism of Japan”, he was subjected to extensive negative comment in Chinese magazines and Internet chat sites (Ma 2004).

In the context of this anti-Japanese feeling in 2004, therefore, state nationalism – the Chinese leadership’s refusal to invite Japanese prime minister Koizumi to China while he continued to visit the Yasukuni Shrine – converged with cultural nationalism – popular resentment at Japan’s failure to recognise its past and its perceived insensitivity to Chinese feelings. In this atmosphere, it was not surprising that the Japanese football team and its supporters might come in for some flak. The Chinese crowd’s booing and jeering began to become particularly obvious when Japan played in Chongqing, a city which has memories of particularly severe Japanese bombing during Japan’s invasion of China in the late 1930s. At the Japan-Jordan game played there, for example, the Chinese spectators cheered loudly for Jordan and stood up for the playing of its national anthem, while remaining seated and booing during the Japanese national anthem. The Japanese media picked up on these incidents, and three times during the course of the tournament the Japanese government requested the Chinese authorities to take precautions to prevent violence occurring and to ensure the safety of Japanese players and fans. While it is conceivable that the events in Chongqing in 2004 (and recent repetitions of them in 2008) were symptomatic of a “local version of nationalism”, derived in part from growing fan commitment to supporting their own local Chinese teams (Gilley 2000:74) and in part from that city’s painful past, the final in Beijing reflected much broader popular nationalist feelings.

## 4 Soccer Hooliganism

The second approach is to consider the events surrounding these two games as typifying hooliganism in the sense of “collective, violent activity conducted principally at football stadia, but often in the surrounding areas, between rival fans” (Cashmore 1990:218). According to Garry Crawford, “unrest and even violence has occurred at mass spectator sports since ancient times” (Crawford 2004:89), and, in the words of Mike Sleaf, it is “a myth that football-related violence is a recent phenomenon” (Sleaf 1998:161). Nonetheless, in recent times governments, academics, and the mass media have become particularly fixated on the violence surrounding soccer games. Over the past two decades or so international media reportage has tended to label this activity as the “English disease”, but careful historical data analysis by Eric Dunning and others has concluded that soccer hooliganism:

Is not and never has been a solely English or British phenomenon but is found to varying degrees and in different forms in virtually every country where the game of Association football is played. (Dunning 2003:91)

However, football hooliganism is a “complex and multifaceted” phenomenon, comprising a number of forms (pitch invasion, violence against match officials, violence against opposing players or fans, etc.) and subject to a number of explanations (Murphy et al. 1990:10-11). Of the numerous academic and journalistic explanations proffered for this phenomenon, the main positions can be summarised under five broad theories. The first, which can be described as an anthropological approach, is sometimes labelled as “observation”, namely, that crowd disorders reflect what the spectators see on the pitch – basically “fans mimicking the aggression of players” (Cashmore 1990:218). The second, often seen as a Marxist analysis, depicts the fans’ actions as a working-class reflex, a reaction against the break-up of the traditional working class under capitalist development (Dunning 2003:90; Sleaf 1998:164-165). The third theory has been called the ethnological account, which emphasises the ritualistic aspects of violence as part of a kind of dramatic performance (Cashmore 1990:219; Sleaf 1998:163-164). A fourth approach, drawing on psychological “reversal theory”, can be simplified as a search for excitement to escape the boredom of everyday life in which the spectators become actors (Baudrillard 1993:76-77; Sleaf 1998:168). The final theory, drawing on sociologist Norbert Elias’ figurational paradigm, argues that the roots lie in the male aggressiveness typical of those at the bottom

of the social scale who wish to fight their way upwards (Dunning 2003:94-101).

Clearly most of these theories are better suited to describing modern Western European societies than they are to China, even a China which has been undergoing such dramatic socio-economic changes in the past three decades. Eric Dunning, whose detailed survey work and analysis on British fans puts him into the figurationalists' camp, is nonetheless aware that soccer hooliganism around the world cannot be expected to derive from identical social roots. Rather, he argues, it is necessary to look for the major "fault lines" – whether they be religious, class, ideological, or regional – of particular countries (Dunning 2003:106-107).

It seems that sports-related disorders did not occur often in China from the 1950s to the 1970s, presumably because many of the spectators at such events were preselected and ordered to attend (Tan 2004:88). Football fan associations only began to emerge in the 1980s as China became involved in more international competitions (Chinese professional football leagues did not begin until 1994), and as such, in 1985, there were only rather embryonic national supporters associations.

After the 1985 match, the official Xinhua news agency's analysis blamed the local Beijing authorities, which "did not provide sufficient spiritual education, civilizational education, and legal education for the youths" (*Nineties* 1985a). The leading Chinese sports newspaper argued on its front page that "athletic events are a window on socialist spiritual civilisation" (*Time* 1985). A CCP circular issued immediately afterwards also reflected the same perspective, arguing that "the masses, particularly young people, must be educated to be civilised watchers" (*Mingpao* 1985a).

Hong Kong-based observers, however, whether journalists or academics, tended to play down this kind of explanation, arguing that the so-called civilizational level of Beijing and its residents had little to do with the riots and that the official Chinese explanations were nothing more than typical bureaucratic responses. Instead, they tended to see these riots as an inevitable result of despair and anger at the defeat, pushing fans' emotions to the point that violence erupted. Hong Kong team coach Kwok later tried diplomatically to argue that the riots were "not that big a deal": "This kind of incident is very common overseas. The football fans are simply dissatisfied with the outcome" (*Nineties* 1985b). This kind of "normal" behaviour was also possible, it was argued, because, unlike the strict discipline of the Mao period, the looser political atmosphere encouraged

some fans to think that they could get away with such actions (*Mingpao* 1985b). The Cultural Revolution had certainly given licence to “revolutionary elements” to use violence, and even in the reform era perceptions of a greater degree of individual freedom and a more general “disregard of common decency” may also have contributed (Ogden 1995:154-157, 190-191).

It should be noted that from the mid-1990s on there were several incidents of soccer hooliganism at Chinese domestic league matches; official statistics reported 43 incidents between 1994 and 2000 that involved pitch invasions or similar disorder (Tan 2004:89). As a response, in 2000 the Ministry of Public Security gave orders about “strict management” at professional soccer games, with measures which included stronger police and paramilitary presences around the grounds, the searching of fans, and the separation of rival fans by fences within the grounds (Gilley 2000). However, these measures did not completely eliminate football-related disorder at domestic games. Such survey data as is available suggests that more than 80 percent of Chinese fans are young (under 30) and that those who do take violent action rarely set out to make trouble on purpose but rather react in a spontaneous way to events, most often what they see as poor refereeing decisions and players’ performances (Tan 2004:90-94).

The Chinese media generally tried to play down the 2004 incident, and coverage of the post-game actions was muted, no doubt on official instructions. The *Beijing Youth Daily* confined itself to describing the fans’ behaviour as an “over-reaction” (Kyodo news agency, 10 August 2004). To some Chinese, such as a commentator in one of the official newspapers, the Chinese fans’ actions were no different from those of fans elsewhere:

Passionate football fans around the world display extreme behaviour and act out of character when emotions run high, and are liable to be more so during matches against rivals. (*China Daily* 2004)

Nonetheless, the writer went on, the treatment of the Japanese team was “a wild deviance from the generally hospitable atmosphere at the Asian Cup [and] revealed an astonishing lack of sportsmanship” (*China Daily* 2004). The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman similarly argued that major international soccer matches “often witness extreme behaviour by a handful of fans, but this does not correspond with the spirit of most”. However, he did add that China “does not agree with or support such behaviour” (Takahashi 2004). Other officials added to this conciliatory tone. China’s ambassador in Tokyo, Wu Dawei, told Japanese foreign minister Yoriko Kawaguchi that the Chinese government regarded these



actions by the fans as being “very unpleasant” and as “something the Chinese government would rather not want to see” (Kyodo news agency, 9 August 2004; *Japan Times* 2004).

In contrast to these Chinese views which portrayed the events as being typical of the soccer hooliganism that had been occurring elsewhere around the world, Japanese commentators, whether in the media or in the political world, devoted little time to considering this interpretation of the events. Rather, they saw the events as expressions of China’s “narrow-minded nationalism”, which the Chinese government was at least indirectly responsible for fostering through its educational and party propaganda policies (Kaneda 2004).

## 5 Conclusion

A few days before the Asian Cup final, Japanese prime minister Koizumi commented, “it is a sports event. Why don’t we all warmly enjoy it?” (Kyodo news agency, 4 August 2004). A commentator in the official *China Daily* newspaper also argued that it was “just a game of soccer”, although the writer also implied that the Japanese government had over-reacted by making such a diplomatic fuss on the eve of the final (*China Daily* 2004). However, the events surrounding not just the 2004 match but also the 1985 match reveal that it is too simplistic to consider these simply as games of soccer. The words of the official *China Daily* itself, describing the 2004 match as “a hotchpotch of soccer and politics” (*China Daily* 2004), could equally well apply to the 1985 match too.

At the most basic level, of course, it is possible to see these events, in 1985 and 2004, as merely emotional responses by the Chinese fans to extreme disappointment at their team’s defeat, especially when expectations of victory had been so high. This would put them into the category, expounded for example by John Kerr, of “anger riots”, a violent reaction to losing (Kerr 2005:99). It is in the nature of sports fans everywhere that they must suffer moments of despair as well as times of great happiness, depending on the fortunes of the teams or individuals that they support. As Mike Slep has argued, “whether or not the football is of a high standard, a crowd undoubtedly gets more excited if a match contains incident and controversy” (Slep 1998:162), as was the case with these two international defeats. Indeed, Tan Hua has argued that “Chinese ‘football hooligans’ appear to be mostly young people affected by the atmosphere in the stadium” (Tan 2004:90). But Chinese fans have been bitterly disappointed on other occasions, most recently, for example, in November 2004,

when China, despite overwhelming Hong Kong by 7-0 in a World Cup qualifier, failed to qualify for the next stage of the play-offs on goal difference and so ended any dreams China had of playing in the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Yet on that occasion, after the match, which was held in Guangzhou, the Chinese fans dispersed quietly and sombrely.

So what was different about May 1985 and August 2004? While there is validity to using both the concepts of nationalism and hooliganism to interpret these events, it is possible to suggest some differences of emphasis between the two matches. In 1985, for all the nationalist and national identity complexes that Chinese fans may have felt towards Hong Kong and its team – and the latent sense of ambivalence over whether Hong Kong was “the Other” or part of China itself – an interpretation which utilises concepts drawn from the literature on hooliganism seems closer to explaining those events. The fault lines, to use the phraseology of Dunning, are in this case between a rigidly controlled society and a crowd which wanted to find a way to let out its frustrations. The slight loosening of the bounds of that society in the months prior to the 1985 match had unexpectedly given the crowd a window of opportunity to give expression to its feelings in a manner normally not conceivable either outside such a stadium or in the immediate past.

In 2004, however, the strong element of nationalism, specifically in juxtaposition to Japan, seems better able to explain the events than recourse to theories of hooliganism. Past Japanese aggression and perceived recent “militaristic” and nationalist actions within Japan had become central to Chinese discourses about identity. State-level self-assertion and popular-level cultural nationalism intermingled, so that whatever pragmatic needs the Chinese leadership may have felt for Japanese economic inputs were overwhelmed, at least momentarily. Ironically, since then and most particularly during the anti-Japanese demonstrations across China in April 2005, the Chinese government has shown itself willing to at least tolerate, even if only temporarily, further visible expressions of that anti-Japanese popular nationalism (Chan & Bridges 2006). Going forward, the challenge for the Chinese leadership is to manage relations with Japan in a way that satisfies both domestic demands for further economic development (to which the Japanese can undoubtedly contribute) and popular nationalist aspirations (which will probably continue to posit Japan in antagonistic terms).

The founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, had a dream that sport would bring countries and their peoples closer together. Certainly,

there are examples which support his contention: the United States and Mao's China developing links through "ping-pong diplomacy" in the early 1970s and Indian and Pakistani leaders coming closer through watching cricket in more recent years. On the other hand, George Orwell, famous for his remarks that serious sport "is war minus the shooting" and that "international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred", is not alone in arguing that international sporting events frequently take on the appearance of surrogate wars which actually "accentuate inter-national dissonance" (Close, Askew & Xu 2007:54-55). To take another North-east Asian example, even though the co-hosting of the 2002 Football World Cup by Japan and South Korea did help to improve their troubled bilateral relationship, particularly at the grass-roots level, the impact seems to have been temporary given the manner in which long-standing animosities over history and territory were resuscitated in subsequent years. Therefore, the beneficial outcomes expected from sporting linkages seem unlikely to be realised through the medium of football when other extraneous influences are brought to bear.

Immediately after the August 2004 events, one Chinese National Olympic Committee official, ironically echoing some of the official comments made after the 1985 match, reportedly described the incidents as demonstrating a "low cultural level", presumably because the Chinese football supporters had ignored various official Chinese admonitions to behave more courteously (Chinese Ambassador Wu had reassured Japanese prime minister Koizumi on the eve of the final that Chinese fans would behave themselves) (Fang 2004). This is a continuing phenomenon, at least where Japanese teams are concerned. In February 2008, despite Chinese official attempts to ban bad behaviour such as the taunting of opposition supporters, Chinese fans booed and jeered Japanese players and fans at the East Asian championship games in Chongqing (*The Standard* 2008). As such, there is a more general concern amongst the Chinese leadership about the likely attitude and behaviour of Chinese fans at the next major sporting event to be held in China, the Olympic Games in August 2008. The expectation of Chinese political leaders, Olympic officials, and the public is that a large number of Chinese athletes will win medals, preferably gold, but whether Chinese failures (and/or Japanese successes) will be treated with equanimity by disappointed local fans remains a concern.

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